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SUBJECT: CUBANS REACT TO VENEZUELAN VOTE WITH MIXTURE OF
ELATION AND ANXIETY

Classified By: A/COM: J. Williams : For reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Cuban dissidents are overjoyed with the defeat of Chavez's proposed constitutional changes. They see this as the end of a messianic campaign of Chavez to be leader of an anti-US bloque. Many also feel that the referendum is a powerful lesson in democracy for the Cuban people. Some leading dissidents also believe that the Cuban government will be pushed into instituting economic reforms. However, some ordinary Cubans are anxious that the vote may signal an end to the generous Venezuelan subsidies and mark a further deterioration in their low standard of living. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Leading dissidents immediately cheered the defeat in Venezuela on 2 December of the referendum proposing constitutional changes. For example, Francisco Chaviano, of the United Liberal Party, stated "Thank God. We need a referendum in Cuba". He echoed the sentiments of many that this was a powerful example for Cubans of democracy and how people do not want the indefinite rule by a single charismatic leader. Even the Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque put a spin on the vote as being a strong rebuke to those who say that Chavez does not respect democracy. Enrique Reyes Fernandez of the Cuban Movement of Youth for Democracy, a group advocating academic freedom, said that people in his organization feel very inspired by the role played by Venezuelan University students in thwarting Chavez's plans.

¶3. (C) Other opposition figures, such as Oswaldo Paya, expressed hope that this is the end of Chavez's ambitions to become the leader of a powerful anti-US bloque. Paya feels that Cuba's foreign policy for years has been defined "by hatred" and that this has been poisonous for Cuban society. Paya has been anxious that Venezuela with its financial resources would tie Cuba to an alliance based solely on inciting hatred for its rivals. Paya like many Cubans felt that Chavez's statement of 14 October that Cuba and Venezuela were the same "country" and as those of Foreign Minister Roque of 30 October that Cuba might relinquish some of its sovereignty to belong to a wider federation were tremendous

insults to Cuban nationalism. Many hope that Chavez has been humbled into giving up some of his more grandiose plans of a Bolivarian federation.

14. (C) Dissidents, like Vladimiro Roca, who believe that Cuba can only advance towards democracy gradually, emphasized that now the Cuban government can only count on 5 more years of petroleum at bargain prices and the GOC will see no choice but to begin to institute economic reforms.

13. (C) Nevertheless, many ordinary Cubans are anxious that this signals the beginning of the end of Venezuelan largess and only means a further deterioration of living standards and a worsening of the scarcity of basic necessities. Fidel Castro's statement in the Cuban press that "Today Monday the Cuban people are anxious about the news relating to Venezuela and his leader, his destiny and his risks" means that the GOC knows that hard times are coming. Several visitors to USINT internet center echoed the sentiments of a retiree quoted in the press that the vote "means we'll stop receiving his (Chavez's) petroleum and his food and we will return to the Special Period (the economic collapse after the fall of the Soviet Union). Other Cubans visiting USINT mentioned that families of the 40,000 Cuban medical personnel in Venezuela are worried that instability in that country might place their relatives at risk. Some thought that rather than force the government to institute reforms, the referendum might make Fidel and Raul think that it is overly risky to give up any control.

14. (C) Comment: The opposition feels inspired by Chavez's

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defeat at the ballot box. The challenge for the Cuban opposition remains to convince a very anxious population that they can halt the collapse of living standards. Many here are watching whether Chavez will come to Cuba for the Petrocaribe summit and the opening of a Venezuelan financed refinery in Cienfuegos in two weeks as a sign of the stability of Chavez's government
PARMLY